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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0293
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0339
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 0489
RUEHBAD/AMCONSUL PERTH 0303
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000784

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SUBJECT: THE REFERENDUM -- 97% VOTE "YES" TO
CONSTITUTIONALLY LIMIT THE POWER OF THE PRESIDENCY; CAN
SUCH A LOP-SIDED VOTE NOT/NOT BE RIGGED?

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

(C) Key Points

-- According to official figures, Mauritania's voters in the national referendum on June 25th were virtually unanimous in their support for several constitutional amendments limiting the powers of the presidency.

-- Here are the numbers:

757,340	Total number of ballots cast (76% of all voters)
21,783	Ballots deemed invalid (2.9% of all ballots)

Of the remaining 735,557 ballots:

Yes:	713,263 (96.97%)
No:	10,427 (1.4%)
Neutral:	11,822 (1.6%) (neutral was an option)

-- The 97% "yes" vote reported by the Mauritanian authorities is consistent with what our Embassy monitors witnessed in over 60 polling stations they visited around the country to observe the vote. The polling stations included some randomly chosen at the last minute.

-- Other election observation teams, including those representing the African Union and the Arab League, and at least one UN election expert, have told us they believe the vote was free and fair and that the referendum met international standards.

-- Some irregularities in electoral mechanics and some procedural lapses did occur. These are reported below. But these problems did not appear to have a significant impact on the referendum results, and they did not appear designed or coordinated to defraud the election results.

-- The Embassy has meetings scheduled, starting tomorrow, June 27th, with UNDP, the UN Electoral Team, and other international partners to discuss further the results of the referendum. We will report further after those meetings.

(C) Comments and Analysis

11. (C) The extraordinarily high percentage of yes votes notwithstanding, the evidence available to us suggests the referendum met international standards for a free and fair election. There could, of course, have been fraud that we have not yet uncovered, and we explore that possibility below in paras. 3-8.

12. (C) Some possible explanations for the validity of a 97% yes vote include the following:

-- The strong influence of a campaign mounted by an extremely popular government to get out the vote in support of the constitutional amendments. The government did not take a neutral stance. It urged all Mauritians to "Vote Yes." The vote could well have been more a referendum on the government than on constitutional change.

-- Those against the government and against constitutional change did not vote, either because the outcome of the referendum was already a forgone conclusion or because they were unable to vote.

-- The recent census and voter registration drive almost certainly disenfranchised at least some Black African Mauritians in the south. This group, which may have been less supportive of the referendum, was not registered at an equal rate to other, potentially more supportive groups.

-- Note: These and other Mauritians will have at least one more chance to register. After many complaints

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about failing to register all eligible Mauritians, including repeated complaints by this Embassy, the government has decided to reopen the voter rolls at least one more time before the presidential election next March. End Note.

13. (C) A second explanation we have considered is outright fraud. However, all those actually in the field observing these elections (both from our observation teams and those from the AU, Arab League, OIF, and UN) have reported an election free from fraud.

14. (C) In all, these teams visited over 125 polling stations around the country, and observed over 30 different ballot tabulations (from the seals on the ballot boxes being cut, to the boxes being opened, to the final tally of ballots). Tallies from these observations all reported ballot counts within the 95% - 98% support range. That's in line with the official results.

15. (C) That is not to say that fraud could not have occurred, but if it did, it would have had to have occurred before the ballot tabulations (such as with ballot stuffing during the day when observers were at another location). While this is possible, the list of registered voters in each polling location would have had to have been altered as well (by checking off names of voters that hadn't voted and then submitting the same number of yes ballots). However, this would have shown up when some of these voters later came to vote and were told that they had already voted and been checked off the list. Observers would most certainly have seen cases of this, but no such cases were reported.

16. (C) UN Electoral Team Communication expert Riccardo Barranca, who had conducted similar observation missions in over 15 other countries told PolOff that "we would have seen widespread fraud if it had occurred," adding that "the level of fraud that would have been needed to fake results such as these would have been impossible to hide."

17. (C) Barranca said "fraud may have gone unnoticed, but the safeguards we had in place here would have kept the impact of

such fraud to only a couple of percentage points at most." Barranca added that he was "surprised by how well organized and transparent these elections appeared." When asked if he thought the election was "free and fair," he said "personally, I do, but that's as much a political question as it is one related to the elections themselves."

¶8. (C) Since so many eyes in the field failed to see a single sign of a deliberate effort to defraud the election, we conclude that the lack of any real referendum opposition, combined with the strong government-led campaign in support of the referendum, are what led to these extraordinary results.

¶9. (C) Additionally, we will report septel on the public reaction of Mauritanian political parties and civil society to these extraordinary election results. Some have claimed that fraud must have played a role (though they provide no examples or theories for such fraud). Others, such as SOS-Esclaves (SOS-Slaves), believes the elections were free and fair, and that the strong results demonstrate the strong support of the Mauritanian public for this transition. SOS-Esclaves' stance follows the government's refusal to allow their organization to observe elections. The group decided to ignore this refusal and went forward with its own observation mission anyway.
LeBaron